

Rep. Nadler Hears Case for Washington, D.C. Voting Rights

Tuesday, 27 January 2009

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today, Congressman Jerrold Nadler (NY-08), Chair of the Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, held a hearing on H.R. 157, the District of Columbia House Voting Rights Act of 2009. This legislation, introduced by D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, would give residents of the nation's capital a vote in the House of Representatives. This was the Subcommittee's first hearing of the 111th Congress.

"It makes absolutely no sense that 588,000 Americans living in the heart of our capital do not have regular Congressional representation," said Rep. Jerrold Nadler. "After more than two centuries, the only word to describe this state of affairs is inexcusable. There is no good reason to deny Washingtonians full representation. The citizens of the capital of the greatest democracy on earth must not be disenfranchised. It is time to remove this stain from our nation's honor."

Washington, D.C. is the only jurisdiction in the United States that does not have a vote in Congress. D.C. residents are instead represented by a non-voting delegate – currently Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton. H.R. 157 would grant Washington one Congressional representative with full voting powers and responsibilities. Today's hearing included testimony by key experts on the issue, including:

- Representative Steny Hoyer (MD-5), House Majority Leader
- Representative Jason Chaffetz (UT-03)
- Representative Louie Gohmert (TX-01)
- Former Representative Tom Davis (VA-11)
- Wade Henderson, President & CEO of Leadership Conference on Civil Rights
- Yolanda Lee, U.S. Army Guard Captain, District of Columbia National Guard
- Jonathan Turley, J.B. & Maurice Shapiro Professor of Public Interest Law,
George Washington University Law School
- Viet Dinh, Founder & Principal of Bancroft Associates PLLC

The following is the text of Rep. Nadler's opening statement at the hearing:

"Today we return to one of the great injustices in our nation: the fact that the citizens of the District of Columbia do not have voting representation in Congress. After more than two centuries, the only word to describe this state of affairs is inexcusable. More than a half-million Americans within sight of this Capitol are completely disenfranchised.

"The people who patrol these streets, put out the fires and provide emergency services, the people who operate the trains and buses, drive the cabs, even the people who work for the members sitting up here on the dais – the people who work so hard to make sure we can do our jobs – do not have the simple voting rights we demand of other nations.

"It is appropriate that this Committee, which produced the Voting Rights Act, should act to secure the vote for the people of the District of Columbia. The current state of affairs is not without consequences. How often does Congress

decide a high-profile issue for the District of Columbia? This body regularly interferes with the rights of D.C. residents in ways that none of our constituents would ever tolerate. Yet Congress does it time and time again.

“How can Congress get away with it? Very simply, the people of the District of Columbia have no vote. They have what this nation fought its revolution over: taxation without representation. The District is not without a voice. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton is a powerful and persuasive voice. Even without a vote in the House, she has been an effective advocate for the city. She is effective in spite of her lack of full voting rights – no small matter. This legislation represents a carefully crafted bipartisan compromise. In 2007, it passed the House by a vote of 241 - 177.

“The principle is clear and I hope uncontroversial: the current state of affairs is repugnant to our system of government. For this reason, I believe that Delegate Norton’s proposal will receive careful and thoughtful consideration. I would hope that the 111th Congress will be the one that finally rights this historic wrong. The citizens of the capital of the greatest democracy on earth must not be disenfranchised. It is time to remove this stain from our nation’s honor.

“I yield back.”